

## OFFENSIVE DISRUPTS CIA PLOT: OPERATION SOUGHT SADDAM'S OVERTHROW

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Saddam Hussein's assault on the Kurdish zone in northern Iraq has undermined a covert operation by the CIA aimed at overthrowing the Iraqi leader, senior administration officials say.

The handful of CIA clandestine officers overseeing a stepped-up covert operation in northern Iraq fled the country last week as Iraqi forces occupied the city of Irbil, an intelligence official said.

They were the only U.S. spies left in the mountains and valleys north of Baghdad, and they left behind a fragmented cadre of agents - among them Iraqi military defectors and Kurdish rebels.

President Clinton expanded the covert operation in January, signing a secret order directing the CIA to provide weapons, organize some military training and install some intelligence-gathering equipment for the fractious groups seeking to unseat Saddam, the officials said.

But the departure of the U.S. intelligence officers involved in this effort, who left along with State Department and U.S. military personnel, will make the operation in northern Iraq ``very difficult'' to continue, one official said.

It will be hard for the U.S. officers to return anytime soon to the Kurdish zone in northern Iraq, one of the most important of several staging grounds for the Iraqi resistance to Saddam.

Although his armed forces have left Irbil, which they occupied Aug. 31, U.S. officials say the Iraqi leader left behind a large secret police force to infiltrate the area, with orders to root out his opponents.

Their list of people to arrest and interrogate would presumably include Iraqis they suspected, correctly or not, of working with U.S. intelligence. They have already arrested and imprisoned some 1,500 suspected Iraqi and Kurdish opposition figures, said a senior member of the Iraqi National Congress, a coalition of resistance organizations.

A State Department spokesman, Glyn Davies, said again Friday that Saddam's secret police had created ``a very massive security presence'' that remained ``very much a factor to be dealt with, in Irbil as well as around it.''

But he said he could not confirm the Iraqi National Congress' assertion that 1,500 people had been arrested. The fate of the much

smaller number of resistance figures actually working with the CIA is unknown.

The Iraqi National Congress is one of the two major dissident groups receiving funds from the CIA. All told, the agency is spending about \$20 million this year toward the elusive goal of removing Saddam from power, the administration officials said.

Since at least 1992, the United States has supported the Iraqi opposition groups with money, information, propaganda tools like radio stations and communications gear like encrypted telephones. The sum being spent this year represents an increase of about \$6 million from 1995.

That increase reflects the most recent presidential order expanding the covert program, which now includes intelligence-gathering equipment, relatively modest amounts of light weaponry, and coordination of military training provided by senior Iraqi military defectors, the officials said.

One official described this year's program as ``an enhanced effort to get rid of Saddam,'' principally directed ``at causing more trouble within his own military,'' by eroding his support within the senior ranks of the Iraqi armed forces, thus increasing the chances of a military coup.

The aim of the newest program against Saddam, another official said, was ``basically to overthrow him with weapons, propaganda and training.'' But a Pentagon official said that relatively few Iraqi military officers have defected and signed up for the covert program, and to expect such a force to overthrow the Iraqi leader was ``naive'' and ``ludicrous.'

The stepped-up covert program has accomplished little, administration officials said. They said that was due in part to the deep divisions within the Iraqi and Kurdish opposition groups, and in part to the questionable competence and small number of the Iraqis involved in the military component of the covert program.

That component has to be small, they said, to keep the armed resistance to Saddam from being infiltrated by Iraqi spies. ``You cannot do a big one, because operationally there are security problems,'' a senior intelligence official said.

But several officials familiar with the overall operation say that even with these precautions the program was far from secret and its chances of success were small.

The two main resistance organizations receiving money from the CIA - the Iraqi National Congress, formed in 1992, and the Iraqi National Accord, formed in 1990 - have not been terribly secretive about the source of that support.

The National Congress, often called an umbrella group for various Iraqi and Kurdish resistance organizations, including the National

Accord, might more accurately be called a patchwork, riven by factional disputes, and now perhaps irreparably sundered.

Last week the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Massoud Barzani, invited Iraqi troops into Irbil to oust a rival resistance group, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

A senior member of the National Congress said in an interview that the Iraqi forces seized computers and files from the National Congress when they occupied Irbil.

``In two hours, the Iraqi opposition lost its entire infrastructure,'' he said. If Saddam's forces can glean sensitive information from those computers and files, it could pose lethal security problems for future resistance operations.

The National Accord, which is based in Jordan and also receives financial support from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, is considered the most promising resistance group.

It beams radio programs throughout Iraq, and its ranks include several prominent high-ranking Iraqi military defectors, including some capable of training and leading soldiers. It boasts of links to officers still serving in Iraq.

But U.S. officials familiar with the National Accord say it does not amount to anything like an armed resistance group capable of mounting a coup. And if the idea behind the expanded covert program was to convey the spirit of rebellion from the Iraqi and Kurdish resistance groups to the Iraqi army, they say, there are few visible signs it has had a significant impact.

The officials said that in any event a \$20 million covert program was unlikely to have much effect on an opponent as tough as Saddam.

A decade ago, by comparison, the congressional intelligence and armed-services committees secretly appropriated as much as \$700 million a year for the anti-Communist rebels fighting the Soviet army's occupying forces in Afghanistan.

The Afghan guerrillas drove out the Soviet troops in 1989. But they have spent much of the last seven years killing one another - as rival Kurdish resistance groups did Thursday and may well do in the future.